

The Ruins of Tomorrow: *Records of Detroit's Collapse* Genny Plumptre

I know not how it was - but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit...I looked upon the scene before me - upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain - upon the bleak walls - upon the vacant eye-like windows - upon a few rank sedges - and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees - with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium - the bitter lapse into everyday life - the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart - an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime.

—Edgar Allen Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*

Abandoned places – derelict homes, gutted factories, vacant lots – litter the North American landscape. In recent years, artists of international calibre seem to have been seized by an obsession with ruin. Images of rusted machinery, cracked pavement, timeworn billboards and the like have become clichés – almost kitsch. The special allure of modern ruins, industrial and otherwise, raises questions about the place of these forsaken spaces in contemporary consciousness. Undoubtedly, there is an element of nostalgia behind these encounters, a desire to restore some lost piece of history to the present. As a kind of visual chronicler of abandoned or neglected aspects of our material heritage, the urban explorer excavates the waste that has been the by-product of our relentless drive to progress. But in most cases, the resulting photograph, well-composed and aesthetically pleasing, jars uncomfortably with its subject matter. Any political tendency is veiled beneath an aesthetic gloss that turns potentially revolutionary art into an object of contemplative enjoyment. In *The Author as Producer*, Walter Benjamin warns of a dangerous convergence between art, photography, and the commodity. He is deeply convinced of the need for art to not only point out social ills, but also to remind us that things could be otherwise. At the same time as it obscures the social conditions behind urban decay, however, ruin photography works on another level to suggest a new way of relating to time and space.

“Ruin porn” has become the label for the growing trend of artfully photographing urban blight. *Vice Magazine* was the first to coin the contentious phrase, deploring journalists’ ‘lazy’ practice of relying on the visual power of images of abandoned buildings to communicate complicated issues of poverty and social inequality – often at the expense of journalistic ethics and integrity.¹ The craze has hit Detroit especially hard. Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre’s forthcoming photographic compilation, “The Ruins of Detroit” is just the next instalment in a parade of publications dedicated to documenting Detroit’s industrial ruins and abandoned homes. Michigan Central Station – a derelict, turn-of-the-century edifice looming over the city’s Roosevelt Park – has become a go-to metaphor for America’s social decline. But as *Vice* contributor Thomas Morton points out, “aside from looking the part, it doesn’t have too much to do with any of the issues it usually gets plastered above. It’s owned by a billionaire trucking tycoon, not the bankrupt city.”² According to its opponents, ruin photography falls prey to an almost ‘pornographic’ sensationalism, invoking images of poverty and economic collapse without making them any more intelligible to the public.

In many ways, the current debate surrounding ruin photography parallels the concerns raised by Benjamin in connection with New Objectivity. Since the Dadaist innovation of photomontage, photography “can no longer record a tenement block or a refuse heap without transfiguring it.”³ Dispelling the notion that photographs offer a direct, unmediated representation of “things as they really are,” Benjamin finds in them something mysterious – even magical. By isolating and enlarging features of the world to which we have grown accustomed, they bring us into contact with the experience of the “optical unconscious,” turning the familiar into something strange. The larger logics by which humankind lives, our sense that the world is given or natural, are shattered by the camera’s distortions of space and time. As Benjamin explains, “[i]t is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. ‘Other’ in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.”⁴ But photography can also work in reverse, making what was previously “other” newly familiar. Blossfeldt’s close-ups of plants, for instance, unlock an entire image world hidden from view: twig ends, leaf buds, seed pods, root tendrils transform into ancient columns, gothic cathedrals, and totem poles – works of

¹ Thomas Morton, “Something, Something, Something, Detroit,” *Vice Magazine*, 1 Aug. 2009 <http://www.vice.com/read/something-something-something-detroit-994-v16n8>

² *Ibid.*

³ Walter Benjamin, “The Artist as Producer,” *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. (United States: Belknap Press, 2008), 86.

⁴ *Ibid.* “The Work of Art,” 37.

human invention.⁵ Through the shock of this defamiliarization, photography offers the hope of awakening people out of their sensory numbness, opening up the world to critical scrutiny.

At the same time as it emerges out of these changes in perception, New Objectivity fails to live up to them. Its function is none other than “to wring from the political situation a continuous stream of novel effects for the entertainment of the public.”⁶ Benjamin has in mind here the work of Albert Renger-Patzsch, who made natural forms, industrial objects, and mass-produced goods the subjects of extreme photographic realism. In his images, waste, abject poverty, and social strife become fodder for the camera, whose only revelation is to exclaim, “The world is beautiful!”⁷ That we are able to see beauty in destroyed homes and wrecked machinery is an eerie reminder of the extent of our self-alienation, such that humankind “can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure.”⁸

The mass appeal of such photographs makes the situation all the more regrettable. It is the special trick of documentary photography that, simply by virtue of its content, it is able to present itself as being revolutionary in nature, all the while calling nothing into question. To see a dilapidated factory tells us almost nothing about it. The sense in which abandoned sites are evidence of America’s rampant social inequality, the casualties of capitalism and a failed welfare state, is all but lost. “Ruin porn” threatens to convert even the struggle against poverty into a source of distraction or amusement. “One could not be more cosily accommodated in an uncanny situation,” Benjamin warns.⁹ In presenting neglected buildings, industries, and communities as objects of aesthetic enjoyment, “ruin porn,” like New Objectivity, obscures the socioeconomic context in which they were produced.

One of the principal criticisms of ruin photography is its failure to include people in or around ruined structures.¹⁰ It dramatizes and romanticizes abandoned spaces, but rarely incorporates those people who inhabit and transform them. This becomes especially problematic in the case of photographs documenting the American Rust Belt, which is populated largely by minorities and the urban poor. American photojournalist Sean Posey underscores this as a major shortcoming of the “Ruins of Detroit” project: “There are still 700,000 plus people in Detroit, most of whom are African American. Their invisibility in photographic documentations is directly related

⁵ *Ibid.* “News About Flowers,” 272.

⁶ *Ibid.* “The Author as Producer,” 86.

⁷ *Ibid.* Benjamin is referring to Renger-Patzsch’s anthology of the same name: *The World is Beautiful*.

⁸ *Ibid.* “The Work of Art,” 42.

⁹ *Ibid.* “The Author as Producer,” 88.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

to their invisibility in policy circles, or in discussions of urban revitalization.”¹¹ By aestheticizing poverty, the results of decades of social and economic neglect, “ruin porn” implicitly legitimizes a system of social and economic inequality.

Is it mere voyeuristic curiosity that motivates these photographers? Since the invention of the digital SLR camera, photography has become more or less public domain. Benjamin was attuned to the way in which modern methods of technological reproduction elevate the “recipients” of culture into collaborators in that culture. So it is that, with the proliferation of “letters to the editor,” self-publishing, and, more recently, blogs and tweets, more and more readers are laying claim to the status of writer: “Since writing gains in breadth what it loses in depth, the conventional distinction between author and public...is disappearing in socially desirable way. The reader is at all times ready to become a writer.”¹² Rather than seeing this as a negative development, insofar as it means the overall quality of art and writing will worsen, Benjamin is optimistic about giving people more opportunities to express themselves. Increasingly, the artist has no authority over the work of art, which can no longer be regarded as the product of an individual. Art has become “a collective creation, a corpus so vast it can be assimilated only through miniaturization...Methods of mechanical reproduction are a technique of diminution that helps people to achieve a degree of mastery over works of art.”¹³ Whereas in the past art was the purview of the dominant class, a kind of fetish to be worshipped at a distance, work designed for reproducibility has shed itself of the sanctity and inviolability of auratic art. The same process that divests the original work of art of its authority also disperses it. Having severed its ties with its foundation in cult and ritual, art is newly responsive to the needs of the proletariat.

The problem with the “ruin porn” formulation is that it shuts down any further inquiry into what is at stake in these photographs—and what we find so endlessly fascinating about urban decline. The degradation of buildings and cities is usually understood as a purely negative phenomenon: the erosion of physical integrity is associated with a parallel loss of cultural information. But Benjamin, at the same time as he registers the dangers associated with unbridled technological and industrial development, seems also to allow for a more optimistic prognosis. Ruins, and ruin photography in particular, counteract the illusion of totality that acts as a hindrance to the formation of a revolutionary consciousness. Thus, “Ruination does not necessarily entail a loss, but a *shift* in the meaning and monumentality of archi-

¹¹ Sean Posey, “What Separates Ruin Porn from Important Documentary Photography?” *Rust-wire*. 14 June 2011, <http://rustwire.com/2011/06/14/what-separates-ruin-porn-from-important-rust-belt-documentary-photography/>

¹² Benjamin, “The Newspaper,” 359.

¹³ *Ibid.*, “Little History of Photography,” 290.

ecture.”¹⁴ Confronted with an image of waste or decay, we feel liberated from the traces of tradition to begin anew. The ruin exemplifies this emancipatory potential, as a way of de-mystifying and de-aestheticizing established traditions from within.

In a sense, the urban explorer is the rag-picker of the twenty-first century. What interests him is not the city’s grand vistas, bustling crowds, or window displays, but the refuse of everyday life: dilapidated homes and wrecked cars, as well as countless other discarded objects. Through these overlooked details, urban explorers, like the rag-picker, forge a deep, personal relationship with the city. Official, monumental displays of history are substituted with a unique – even intimate – temporal experience. Wandering in the city, exploring its everyday landscape, provides an encounter not only with modernity but also with the past as it continually and uncannily resurfaces in the present. Here old and new exist side by side in a material palimpsest of layered time.

Benjamin was himself irresistibly drawn to the derelict arcades of early twentieth century Paris as a site at which the major themes of modernity coalesced. Interested in the complex interrelations between art, architecture, and politics, for him the ruin became an emblem of tradition, history, and the place of the individual within them. Indeed, the concept of ruin pervades Benjamin’s thought in ways that are not always so explicit: in his privileging of the story over the novel as a form of telling that, because it is partial, is more readily taken up into experience; in his reflections on the obsolescence of the new exemplified by the commodity; in the modern media’s repugnance for information that is enduring, Benjamin betrays a fixation with the ruined, the abandoned, and the fragmentary. As Susan Buck-Morss points out, “The other side of mass culture’s hellish repetition of ‘the new’ is the mortification of matter which is fashionable no longer.”¹⁵ In modern industrial, capitalist culture, the ruin is built into commodity materials; it is embedded in human consciousness itself.

For Benjamin, then, the notion of “ruin” applies equally to the conceptual as to the physical world, referring to the tendency of cultural artefacts and modes of perception to wear out. Whether applied as a verb or a noun, it describes a distinct way of seeing and of thinking. Benjamin’s writing in the *Arcades Project* is itself fragmentary, broken – a collection of literary ruins. Its constitutive incompleteness is consistent with Benjamin’s broader insistence upon the fragmentary nature of all knowledge. Exploring its maze of passages is akin to the experience of strolling along the streets, back alleyways, and dead ends of a city. Getting lost is easy: there is none of the structure or tight narrative progression typical of a written work. To move through it requires that the reader adopt the habits of the *flâneur*, whose idle, aimless wanderings find their natural home in the crowd.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991), 160.

It is significant that, at the time of Benjamin's writing, Europe was quickly degenerating into a vast field of rubble. If the Second World War brought a literal release from the stultifying force of tradition, then the physical destruction it wreaked on the landscape can be read as a symbolic shattering of the continuum of history. Seeing the great metropolises of Europe in the hour of their destruction afforded Benjamin a particular insight into them. Through the shock of destruction and the new juxtapositions it creates, "the subject emerges from the 'dream' of tradition and into modern life in the present."¹⁶ As Benjamin writes, "The development of the forces of production had turned the wish-symbols of the previous century into rubble, even before the monuments which represented them had crumbled."¹⁷ Inevitably, monuments designed to display the strength and resilience of an empire to posterity instead become witnesses to its collapse. In the detritus of the 20th century is buried an age's unfulfilled collective dreams.

Atget photographed the deserted streets of Paris in such a way that they became virtually unrecognizable. Part of the impact of his photographs, for Benjamin, is their implication of guilt, prompting us to wonder, "Is not every square inch of our city the scene of a crime?" In much the same way, photographs of decay point beyond themselves, as material reminders of the transience of all things. Despite frequent criticism of the "Ruins of Detroit" photo-essay project for its exploitative treatment of poverty, photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre insist upon the importance of their work in documenting the dramatic decline of a major American city. The artists are explicit about their intention that their post-apocalyptic images be taken not as particular instances of abandonment and decay, but considered in the broader context of American modernity: "The images bring to mind a Biblical disaster; it is as if all Detroit's citizens had fled. The abandoned factories and buildings, vacant schools and derelict ballrooms are a poignant reminder of the fragility of the modern world and, possibly on a different scale, of a now 'broken America.'" To quote Coleman Young, Detroit's controversial former mayor during the years of the city's most severe decline, "Detroit today is your town tomorrow."¹⁸

Coleman's words offer a bleak reminder of the sense in which ruins, although grounded in the past, also project themselves into the future. As they accumulate, photographs of urban decay become ominous signifiers of social and economic collapse. Matthew Christopher, another chronicler of abandoned spaces in America, persistently describes his work with metaphors of death. He understands

¹⁶ Naomi Stead, "The Value of Ruins: Allegories of Destruction in Benjamin and Speer," *Form/Work: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the Built Environment*, no. 6, Oct. 2003, pp. 51-64.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," *Die Welt im Wort*. (United States: Belknap Press, 2008), 86.

his images not simply as documents of decay, but as visual records of a series of failures whose culmination “shows a trend even greater (and more ominous), that of an overall social decline leading to the fall of an entire empire.”¹⁹ There is a resemblance between Christopher’s understanding of ruin photography as registering the promise of America’s decline, and the way Baudelaire approached Paris. As Benjamin observes, “The Paris of [Baudelaire’s] poems is a sunken city, and more submarine than subterranean. The chthonic elements of the city—its topographic formations, the old abandoned bed of the Seine—have evidently found in him a mold.”²⁰ Such a dystopian vision has the effect of “casting ruination into the future,” placing us within ongoing historical and material processes of decay.

As a direct confrontation with the decay so pervasive in modern capitalist culture, photographs of destruction and abandonment can be unsettling. They erode our sense of security in the environment, our trust in the permanence of the world in which we live. But there is an undeniable nostalgia about these sites as well. They invoke a romantic notion of the ruin as containing the trace of prior times. Yet, considered within the context of Benjamin’s reflections on tradition and technological reproducibility, the significance of these works is more complex. With the spread of ruin photography, and of art more generally, the importance of authorship and artistic intent diminishes. Whatever the artists’ personal motivations for fixating on ruin, the significance of their work lies precisely in its *banality*. As the camera colonizes more and more of the city’s streets, it leads us gradually to the realization that ruins are not so much made as waiting to be recognized. Embedded in a culture of consumption and waste, we project ruins onto the future, as sites of potentiality. Reflected back to us in photographs of abandonment is an image of our own transience: the demise of contemporary buildings, institutions, and the people and practices associated with them. Only once “all ephemeral beauty drains away and the work asserts itself as a ruin” – a record the destructive effects of human technology and intervention in the landscape – do we realize that, in fact, it was a ruin all along.²¹ Beyond the obvious connotations of loss and abandonment, ruin photography also embodies a new field of possibilities. Through the violence and destruction it portrays, the present is revealed to itself – reduced and incomplete, but constantly remaking itself.

¹⁸ Coleman Young cited in John Leary, “Detroitism,” *Guernica*, 15 January 2011, http://www.guernicamag.com/features/leary_1_15_11/

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” 105.

²¹ Benjamin, “The Ruin,” 184.

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